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Diplomat's Enemies Play Role In Blocking His Appointment

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Last September veteran diplomat Morten I. Abramowitz was offered the choice post of assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, the top Asian policy job in the government. He was naturally pleased—but he had enemies who were not.

Partly because of their political and bureaucratic opposition, his appointment did not develop, and he was selected instead in early October to be U.S. ambassador to Indonesia. President Reagan himself telephoned the offer; Abramowitz accepted.

But within a few weeks, disappointing word was mysteriously received from Jakarta that the Indonesian government preferred that he not be named.

A statement issued yesterday in the name of Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. announced with regret that Indonesia will not accept this "truly outstanding Foreign Service officer," thus ringing down the curtain on six months of agonizing uncertainty for Abramowitz, and quite possibly presaging the end of a 22-year diplomatic career.

What happened to Merton Abramowitz is an extraordinary episode, even for unusual times, illuminating a netherworld of intrigue that has affected several Reagan diplomatic nominations, as well as the torturous pace at which a number of key personnel decisions have been made.

Though he was backed by Haig and at times personally approved by Reagan, Abramowitz was opposed not by outsiders but by enemies within the administration itself.

Among their most important weapons in this effort was an anonymous and confidential paper, much of it inaccurate, which was prepared by military officers, reportedly with the help of Abramowitz's former CIA station chief at a post abroad, in an effort to stop Abramowitz's rise within the administration.

After Reagan and his senior assistants decided to nominate Abramowitz as ambassador to Indonesia, the internal paper mysteriously found its way to the top rank of the Indonesian government and ultimately into the hands of columnist Jack Anderson.

The document apparently played a role in Jakarta's decision, conveyed in preliminary terms last November and in final terms two weeks ago, not to accept Abramowitz as U.S. ambassador.

Another shadowy aspect of the case, prominent in reporters' questions about it at the State Department yesterday, is "the religion angle." Abramowitz is Jewish, and Indonesia is a predominately Islamic country. Despite rumors that this affected Jakarta's decision, both State Department spokesman Dean Fischer and Abramowitz himself, in a terse statement yesterday, said the Indonesians never conveyed an indication that religion was a factor.

Abramowitz, 49, has amassed one of the most outstanding records in the active U.S. diplomatic service, most of it involved with Asia. Among other things, he served in Taiwan and Hong Kong, as political adviser to the chief of the U.S. forces in the Pacific, as the Pentagon's senior specialist on Asian affairs and, in the

three years preceding his travail, as U.S. ambassador to Thailand.

Both in the Pentagon and as ambassador to Thailand, Abramowitz received awards for unusually effective service, including the prestigious Joseph C. Wilson Award for achievement in diplomatic affairs, and last year the President's Award for Distinguished Federal Service. At the same time, though, his blunt manner and some of his bureaucratic moves and positions earned him the enmity of some officials.

Abramowitz was considered especially vulnerable in connection with Reagan administration posts because of a long friendship with Richard C. Holbrooke, the Carter administration's assistant secretary of state for Asian affairs, who is anathema to many conservatives. The two men, though friends, did not always agree, and Abramowitz had many admirers who disliked Holbrooke.

Abramowitz remained in Bangkok for seven months after the onset of the Reagan administration. When he was replaced in that post last August the word was around that he was likely to be nominated as ambassador to the Philippines, in part because President Ferdinand Marcos is said to have personally expressed his admiration for Abramowitz and his interest in his appointment.

In mid-September, back in Washington, Haig had decided to replace his assistant secretary for Asian affairs, John H. Holdridge, and to offer him the embassy in the Philippines. It was Haig's idea, according to several knowledgeable sources, that Abramowitz would move to the top Asian affairs job, where his combination of experience and bureaucratic toughness was high on Haig's qualifications list.

After Abramowitz was offered and